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Feasting in a time of famine: The English Premier League, 'conspicuous consumption' and the politics of austerity

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Abstract

Since 2010, successive Conservative-led governments have imposed a series of austerity measures in an attempt to curb levels of public spending and bring Britain's national deficit back 'under control'. Despite this political imperative, however, there remains within certain areas of economic and social life, a persistence of what Thorstein Veblen famously termed 'conspicuous consumption'. The English Premier League is, I argue here, one such example, and this article offers a reworking of Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* to explore some of the ways in which England's elite football clubs have continued to demonstrate a 'propensity for emulation' and 'conspicuous consumption', specifically, by spending considerable sums acquiring new players and redeveloping their stadiums. Under these conditions of public austerity, the private wealth of English football's global leisure class has soared, leaving these clubs disembedded from their predominately working-class neighbourhoods, and the self-same communities that have borne the brunt of these government cuts and welfare reforms. Precarity, economic anxiety and acute social vulnerability are now everyday experiences for those living in the shadows of England's wealthiest clubs. Politically too, however, this is also significant since the sealing-off of this leisure class reveals the limits of austerity itself. Exposing it as an ideological choice rather than 'economic necessity', these class relations demonstrate in stark terms that 'we' as a nation – let alone 'a football nation' – are not 'all in this together'. Cut adrift from the clubs that they historically sustained, these communities have been left to navigate this latest crisis of capitalism alone.

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In 2010, the newly assembled Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition signed the United Kingdom up to become the latest country to participate in the global austerity experiment. The then Chancellor of Exchequer, George Osborne (2010a) claimed that his '80:20' strategy – that is, roughly 80% savings through spending cuts and 20% through higher taxes – would rebalance the nation's books. Although these deflationary measures were 'tough' and 'necessary', Osborne (2010b) insisted they would nevertheless also be 'fair' and distributed evenly to ensure that 'we' would be 'all in this together' (Alexander, 2011; Cameron, 2009; Osborne, 2012). Yet, as this new era of what the Prime Minister, David Cameron (2013), would later term 'permanent austerity' began to bite, it quickly became evident that Osborne's plan was, as Mark Blyth (2013: 43) had warned, deeply regressive, with the burden of these cuts falling disproportionately across society. Rather being 'all in it together', very clear limits to this austerity had already started to emerge; limits which would do little to constrain the consumption enjoyed by the wealthy but rather deepen the social and economic vulnerabilities faced by the least well-off in society.

This article examines England's leading Premier League football (or soccer) clubs as one such class of wealthy elites operating beyond this austerity. I argue that in the midst of these spending cuts, a transnational assemblage of owners, broadcasters, corporate sponsors and supporters have coalesced around these elite sporting institutions to form a new leisure class at the top of English football. Developing Thorstein Veblen's (1965 [1899]) *Theory of the Leisure Class*, I argue here that the practices of 'emulation' and 'conspicuous consumption' that Veblen himself observed in late-nineteenth century America, today mirror several of the behaviours exhibited by England's wealthiest clubs as they look to consolidate their place within the wider leisure class of European football. For Veblen, 'emulation' provided the stimuli for members of the wealthy leisure class to indulge in the 'conspicuous consumption' that self-defined these elites. As I demonstrate here, in an attempt to outperform their rivals, English football's leisure class have reproduced these behaviours, principally through ever-rising levels of transfer spending and stadium redevelopment.

If the emulation and conspicuous consumption of these clubs forms the first part of my argument, my main concern is how these practices have – to borrow Karl Polanyi's (1968 [1957]) memorable term – 'disembedded' these clubs from their local communities. In the 8 years since government ministers first started to preach the virtues of 'thrift' and 'responsible spending', clubs playing in the top tier of English football have shelled out a remarkable £8.52 billion on transfer fees alone. To put this into context, this equates to £1.93 billion more than these clubs

spent in the previous 18 years *combined*.¹ In the 2017–2018 season alone, Arsenal (£107 million), Chelsea (£232 million), Everton (£182.4 million), Liverpool (£151 million), Manchester City (£284.2 million), Manchester United (£148 million) and Tottenham Hotspur (£109.4 million) collectively spent over a billion pounds acquiring new players, more than the other 13 Premier League clubs put together and more than every one of the clubs across Europe's other top divisions in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. While this provides an outline of the contemporary financial landscape of European football, in an era of persistent government cuts and welfare retrenchment in the United Kingdom at least, this consumption is significant. To borrow John Kenneth Galbraith's (1958: 203) famous couplet, the 'private opulence' of England's leading clubs today coexists with the 'public squalor' experienced in their local communities. This, I argue, has created an ever-deepening fault-line of inequality across the heartlands of English football, a divide that exposes the class relations of this consumption and the political limits of austerity itself.

To explore the genealogies of this consumption and inequality in the modern English game, I take as my point of departure the simultaneously local and global landscapes upon which these elite clubs are now situated. These geographies are crucial for they have facilitated the wealth that has enabled the leisure class of English football to reproduce itself through the emulation and conspicuous consumption described by Veblen. Yet, while these behaviours explain the current chrematistic mentality of the English game, they have also disembedded these clubs from the crisis-ridden realities faced by their local communities. To demonstrate this point empirically, the section that follows draws upon data collected from government, local authority and third-sector agencies whose remit covers the neighbourhoods that surround the stadiums of England's biggest clubs. With these 'Veblen behaviours' still firmly in mind, this evidence reveals the gendered, racialised and class-bound geographies of this inequality and austerity. In concluding this article, I re-emphasise the significance of the emulation and conspicuous consumption of this leisure class, highlighting its place in the contemporary class relations underpinning English football and the ways in which these practices reveal the economism of austerity and its limits as a political project.

Thorstein Veblen and the global place of English football's leisure class

The work of Thorstein Veblen has, broadly speaking, fallen out of fashion among more contemporary theorists of consumption (Campbell, 1995: 37). Post-modernity, Featherstone (1991: 83) argues, has created a society that can no longer be dominated by social status groups such as the leisure class that Veblen described (see also Bocock, 1993: 31). I argue here, however, that Veblen's analysis still has much to say concerning the consumption and class relations present in the global political economy of elite English football. The transformation of the game's financial structure in the modern era has furnished the conditions for a small, but

wealthy leisure class of clubs to emerge and embark upon the self-same practices of 'emulation' and 'conspicuous consumption' that Veblen first theorised over a century ago.

Although locally rooted, the clubs that comprise English football's leisure class are today situated upon an altogether more global landscape (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004; May, 2018; Millward, 2011). While this reveals something of the almost universal appeal of the English Premier League (hereafter, EPL), it has nevertheless created a series of tensions between those traditional caucuses of support upon which these clubs historically relied, and the newer, altogether more global orientation of these clubs. Of course, its local rivalries – for example, between Liverpool and Everton, Liverpool and Manchester United, United and Manchester City, Arsenal and Tottenham – remain an enduring and popular feature of the English game. The expansionist tendencies of these clubs, however, including those of their transnational owners, mean that these 'derbies' are now constructed in such a way that they often commodify rather than cultivate these local constituencies (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007: 137). As England's leading clubs look to penetrate the game's less-established frontiers across Asia, North America and Africa, these local contests have been steadily de-territorialised and re-constituted for consumption in these lucrative new markets.

That profit can be made out of creating new geographies is, as Harvey (2011: 181) has remarked, a fundamental aspect of the reproduction of global capitalism – and so it has proved with the EPL. The drama for which the top-flight of English football is renowned has pushed stadium occupancy levels up to 96% (Premier League, 2018) and enabled clubs to negotiate the sale of television rights with domestic and overseas broadcasters to the tune of around £2 billion every year. Indeed, although the £4.464 billion raised by Sky and BT Sport ahead of the 2019–2022, domestic cycle represents a slight decrease from the previous arrangement, it still dwarfs the deals that the top divisions in France, Germany, Italy and Spain have been able to negotiate with their respective home broadcasters.

This wealth, together with the exponential growth of its global audience, has attracted investors from across the world. Where once clubs were owned by local businessmen – and even then, usually for pleasure and prestige rather than profit – in the 2018–2019 season, only six of the EPL's 20 clubs had a majority ownership domiciled in the United Kingdom. The division's 14 other clubs were controlled by owners from China (Southampton and Wolverhampton Wanderers), Iran (Everton), Italy (Watford), Russia (Bournemouth and Chelsea), Malaysia (Cardiff City), Thailand (Leicester City), the United Arab Emirates (Manchester City) and the United States (Arsenal, Crystal Palace, Fulham, Liverpool and Manchester United). The majority of these ownerships have come about through a series of leveraged buy-outs, saddling these clubs with considerable debts and even bigger repayments (Wilson et al., 2013). In 2005, for example, the Glazer family acquired Manchester United by loading £525 million onto its previously debt-free books. Although United have been able to deliver record-breaking levels of revenue through an ever-expanding portfolio of commercial partnerships, the

club also continues to haemorrhage cash, servicing these debts and paying dividends to the Glazers. Yet as if to mirror the continued normalisation of debt in neoliberal economies (Montgomerie, 2007) neither this indebtedness nor indeed the subsequent protests of supporter groups (Brown, 2007; Millward, 2012) appear to have dampened the conspicuous consumption of these clubs.

Emulation is the principle reason why many clubs have chosen to frontload their spending through this borrowing. Here, two clubs in particular have redrawn the financial structure and competitiveness of the EPL, following considerable levels of investment from their respective owners. In 2003, Chelsea came under the ownership of Russian billionaire, Roman Abramovich and 5 years later, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan's Abu Dhabi United Group took over Manchester City. Of course, on one level, these interventions are significant in terms of the broader geopolitical influence that elites from Russia and the Gulf have sought to exert upon the United Kingdom in recent years. In terms of the Veblen behaviours of emulation and conspicuous consumption discussed here, however, these developments have increased the pressure upon the owners of rival clubs to keep pace with these extraordinary levels of new investment.

This new capitalist class has leveraged the global appeal of the EPL to form a series of transnational commercial partnerships. From airlines to automotive firms and banks to betting companies, these strategic alliances have enabled clubs to enter and impose themselves in new overseas markets. Together with this highly lucrative aggregation of broadcasting deals and owner investment, these commercial arrangements have enabled England's biggest clubs to embed themselves within these new geographies of consumption and advance their own class position. In historical terms, it represents a remarkable transformation. Out of the crisis faced by English football in the 1980s, when bankruptcy, hooliganism and tragedy threatened to bring about the demise of the national game, its biggest clubs have been transformed from feudal serf to spender. In the decades since, the 'fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance' observed by Baudrillard (1998 [1970]: 1) has come to be reflected by those clubs who today comprise English football's leisure class. The regimes of wealth accumulation established by this class have enabled its richest members to make very public displays of spending on modern, state-of-the-art stadiums and multi-million pound 'marquee' signings.

This consumption, however, has not been limited to the likes of Arsenal, Chelsea, Everton, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur. This wealth has also blurred the hierarchy of clubs further down the EPL with an additional eight clubs outside of this elite listed among the 30 wealthiest in world football (Deloitte, 2018). Several of these so-called 'smaller' (pp. 5, 7) clubs have made significant outlays, refurbishing their stadiums and breaking their own transfer records. Indeed, while the titles won by Blackburn Rovers and Leicester City in 1995 and 2016 are frequently romanticised as never-to-be-repeated 'David-versus-Goliath' triumphs, even these provincial clubs were the beneficiaries of no small amount of investment by their respective owners. While these sides and others like them might not ordinarily be competing

at the top end of the table, this wealth is nevertheless considered crucial for clubs to survive in this most lucrative of leagues. Crucially, this money has provided England's leading clubs with the 'pecuniary strength' required to emulate the consumption of their rivals (Veblen, 1965 [1899]: 68–69, 75). These behaviours are the chief referent points of the leisure class; behaviours that Veblen (1965 [1899]: 70) argued, distinguished this class from those outside this financial elite. It is to these Veblenian behaviours, in the context of the EPL, that I now turn my attention.

'Emulation' and 'conspicuous consumption' in the EPL

Those familiar with *The Theory of the Leisure Class* might be surprised to see Veblen's work used here to theorise the practices of consumption among football clubs. Deeply ambivalent towards the social and cultural value of sport, Veblen (1965 [1899]: 256) himself viewed it as being bound up in one-upmanship and superiority over others. Yet, it is precisely these emulative practices that provide the chief motive behind the conspicuous consumption of this status-obsessed class (Veblen, 1965 [1899]: 25). Although among individual consumers today, there may exist an array of variables that might explain their own variegated acts of consumption (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 59), for this Veblenian analysis of English football, emulation provides a useful framework to explain the conspicuous forms of consumption that take place among its wealthiest clubs.

For Veblen, emulation represented a slight but important departure from the work of an even earlier theorist of capital and consumption, John Rae, who observed that where 'consumption is conspicuous', the commodities in question are rare, expensive and, crucially, displayed (Rae, 1905 [1834]: 283). Veblen certainly was familiar with the work of Rae (Alcott, 2004; Edgell and Tilman, 1991: 731) with Veblen later praising the work of the Scottish-Canadian economist (Veblen, 1909: 296). However, despite Rae's 'conspicuous consumer' finding its way into Veblen's own work some 65 years later, and Rae himself appearing to offer 'an extensive treatment of conspicuous consumption ... along Veblenian lines' (Leibenstein, 1950: 184), there is, as Mason (1981) has noted, a slight but crucial difference. While Rae suggested that it was vanity and self-indulgence which underpinned the excesses of his times (Mason, 1981: 3–4), for Veblen, it was social status and prestige (Mason, 1981: 5). While personal vanity and pleasure might explain such indulgences, emulation creates a mode of consumption that through its conspicuousness makes a social statement as to the wealth of the wearer by creating a distancing-effect from the everyday necessities of functional practicality and work (Du Gay, 1996: 83).

To create this 'distancing-effect', the owners of England's leading clubs have embarked upon a remarkable period of stadium redevelopment. This emulation began when Arsenal decided to leave its Highbury stadium and move to a new £390 million, 59,867-capacity stadium at Ashburton Grove (later renamed the Emirates after a sponsorship deal with the airline). For all its history and tradition, Highbury could only accommodate 38,419 spectators, leaving Arsenal well adrift of

Manchester United, whose 74,994-seater Old Trafford ground gave it far greater financial firepower. As soon as Arsenal closed this gap, however, other clubs soon followed. During the 2015–2016 season, Manchester City’s Etihad stadium – again renamed following an arrangement with the airline – was redeveloped at a cost of more than £50 million to bring its capacity up to 55,000. On Merseyside, Liverpool’s American owners, the Boston-based Fenway Sports Group, spent £115 million building a new 20,500-seater Main Stand to increase the capacity of Anfield up to 54,074 ahead of the 2016–2017 season. Plans, meanwhile, are currently afoot to relocate neighbours Everton to a new 55,000-seater stadium at Bramley Moore. Back in London, Arsenal’s rivals, Tottenham are currently completing the £400 million redevelopment of White Hart Lane to enable it to welcome up to 62,000 fans. Of this leisure class, Chelsea are the only club bucking this trend, shelving its plans to build a new £1 billion, 60,000-capacity stadium on the site of its current Stamford Bridge home.

Of course, these redevelopments make good commercial sense. Demand for tickets more often than not outstrips supply, and to profit from this demand, clubs have moved to increase the size of their respective stadiums and create ultramodern ‘citadels of commerce’ (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2016: 93). Yet beyond this logic, a Veblenian reading of emulation offers a further persuasive explanation. To reflect their status as wealthy elite sporting institutions and to position themselves within the wider social structure of this leisure class (Corrigan, 1997: 17; Lury, 2011: 47), England’s leading clubs *need* to be playing in these gleaming edifices of footballing modernity. Contra the charge of ‘pre-symbolism’ that McCracken (1990: 10) brings against Veblen, the very *conspicuousness* of these stadiums makes them highly symbolic in their own right. These futuristic stadiums provide clubs with ‘a means of reputability’ (Veblen, 1965 [1899]: 75); a reputation that subsequently enables these clubs to reproduce a particular class-based identity (Stebbins, 2009: 44; Trigg, 2001: 100).

For all the investment that has been spent on these stadiums, however, the most potent symbol of a club’s ‘status’, ‘reputability’ and ‘identity’ remains the acquisition of new players. No other act of consumption is as conspicuous as the unveiling of a multi-million-pound player, and these acquisitions have come to symbolise powerful ‘statements of intent’ by owners. Indeed, so significant are these big-money signings (such as those listed in Table 1) that although the transfer window itself may only be open for 3 months during a year – between July and August before the start of the season and then again throughout January – even when it is shut, speculation and self-titled ‘gossip columns’ are filled on a daily basis of transfer rumours, conjecture, that is subsequently reproduced and discussed at length by fans. As Veblen (1965 [1899]) himself observed, costly articles of consumption are ‘noble and honorific’ (p. 70). As clubs and their fans look to emulate their rivals by ‘spending big’ on new signings, the marketisation of these players in the everyday discourse of the EPL has normalised the broader wealth and conspicuous consumption at the top of the English game. Given his own personal disdain for sport as well as his broader critique of this class, it is unlikely that

Table 1. Signings made by English Premier League clubs for over £50 million.

Club	Player	Fee (£m)	Season
Arsenal	Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang	57.38	2017–2018
Chelsea	Kepa Arrizabalaga	72.00	2018–2019
	Álvaro Morata	59.40	2017–2018
	Fernando Torres	52.65	2010–2011
Liverpool	Jorginho	51.30	2018–2019
	Virgil van Dijk	70.92	2017–2018
	Alisson Becker	56.25	2018–2019
	Naby Keita	54.00	2018–2019
Manchester City	Kevin De Bruyne	68.40	2015–2016
	Riyad Mahrez	61.02	2018–2019
	Aymeric Laporte	58.50	2017–2018
	Raheem Sterling	57.33	2015–2016
	Benjamin Mendy	51.75	2017–2018
Manchester United	John Stones	50.04	2016–2017
	Paul Pogba	94.50	2016–2017
	Romelu Lukaku	76.23	2017–2018
	Ángel Di María	67.50	2014–2015
	Anthony Martial	54.00	2015–2016
	Fred	53.10	2018–2019

Source: Figures obtained from Transfermarkt (2018 values).

Veblen himself would have been surprised by this chrematistic mentality. Crucially, however, such a mentality has overridden any financial rectitude, even in a time of economic uncertainty and certainly irrespective of the austerity encountered by the communities that surround them.

Rarely problematised, the conspicuous consumption among English football's leisure class has nevertheless disembedded its clubs from the everyday realities of poverty and austerity encountered just metres from their respective stadiums. It is to these realities that I now turn my attention. In many respects, this part of the study develops those studies that have explored the rise of poverty in Britain (Armstrong, 2017; Lansley and Mack, 2015) and the different ways in which austerity has deepened already-present inequalities (Dorling, 2014; Nunn, 2016; O'Hara, 2015), specifically along lines of class (Atkinson et al., 2013; McKenzie, 2015), gender (Ginn, 2013; Karamessini and Rubery, 2014), race and ethnicity (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Bhattacharyya, 2015). That women and people of colour across Britain's working-class communities are persistently the worst affected by these cuts demonstrates the intersectional politics of austerity and the unevenness of its distribution. Keeping in mind these inequalities, the geography of this austerity is also significant. Donald et al. (2014) describe austerity as

‘a particularly urban phenomenon’ (p. 12), especially visible on the metropolitan landscape because cuts to public expenditure have been targeted specifically at city governments (Hall, 2015: 140–141). The ‘austerity urbanism’ described by Peck (2012) has seen local councils across England experience an average real-terms funding cut of 26% since 2010 (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2016). As I shall now show, these cuts have deepened the poverty that exists in these communities. While it is not always possible to draw direct comparisons between each of these areas, it is nevertheless possible to build an empirically detailed picture of this deprivation: where it is concentrated, who it is affecting and the type of impacts that austerity is continuing to have upon these specific communities.

Austerity and anxiety in the northern soul of English football

Between 1960 and 1990, the city of Liverpool was viewed as a city in economic decline (Wilks-Heeg, 2003) and one facing a mounting political crisis (Murden, 2006). In footballing terms however, it was the undisputed capital of the English and European game, when Liverpool in particular, reigned supreme. Over the course of the three decades that have followed however – ironically, during the same period that the city has entered a period of urban regeneration and civic renewal (Couch, 2008) – neither Liverpool or Everton have been able to sustain the city’s place at the pinnacle of English football. Yet, despite a shift in the balance of power towards Manchester and London, the rivalry between the two Merseyside clubs remains as fierce as ever. Their respective grounds, Anfield and Goodison Park, are situated less than a mile apart and their local fans are frequently drawn from the same households as one another.

The close proximity of the two clubs means that, although the two grounds are situated in two separate council wards – Anfield and County – they share a broadly similar set of socio-economic outcomes. In all, 83.3% of Anfield and 91.7% of the County ward are in the poorest decile of the United Kingdom (Liverpool City Council (LCC), 2017a: 1, 2017c: 1). This deprivation is reflected in multiple ways but one of the starkest is in terms of the average household incomes. In 2008, while the national average stood at £31,253, levels of household pay in Anfield and County stood at £24,955 and £24,928 respectively (LCC, 2010a: 6, 2010b: 6). By 2016, however, average household incomes in the Anfield area stood at £21,555, while households in County had seen their wages fall further still to £21,247 (LCC, 2017a: 5, 2017c: 5). With incomes already well below the national average, households in both these areas have come under further strain, particularly those with young children. In all, 43.2% of children in Anfield and 41.9% in County live in poverty – more than twice the national rate (LCC, 2017a: 5, 2017b: 5).

Between 2010 and 2014, the number of children living in low-income families in Anfield and County rose between 3% and 4% (LCC, 2017c: 27), and by 2014, all but two of Liverpool’s 30 council wards had recorded double-digit levels of child poverty, up to three to four times the national average (LCC, 2017a: 6, 2017b: 6). This poverty has left child health rates across the city ‘worse than the national

average' (National Health Service (NHS) Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group, 2014: 47); the long-term consequences of which will be a further decline in already low life-expectancy rates (Dorling, 2017). While the national life-expectancy average currently stands at 79.5 years (Office for National Statistics, 2015: 2–3), men in Anfield and County can only expect to live until 71.9 and 75.2 years respectively. Although women in these two wards enjoy a slightly longer life expectancy – 77.8 years in Anfield and 78.4 in County – these are still significantly shorter than the female national average of 83.2 years (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Yet if these figures reveal disparities with other parts of the country, even across Liverpool itself there exist significant intra-city inequalities. In the affluent suburb of Childwall, for example, men can expect to live 13 years longer than those living in Anfield (LCC, 2017c: 17).

Although both Liverpool and Everton have prospered financially in the Premier League era, thousands living in their respective neighbourhoods and across the city continue to face considerable hardship. Yet, Merseyside is not the only post-industrial, northern footballing city to witness simultaneously the heavily 'globalized' conspicuous consumption of its two clubs *and* acute social deprivation. Thirty miles east of Liverpool lies the Trafford suburb of Stretford, where Old Trafford, the home of Manchester United is situated. United stand today as the wealthiest club in world football (Deloitte, 2018), epitomising more than any other the shift from 'local team' to 'global brand' (Hamil, 2008). Joining United among this financial elite in more recent years are their cross-town rivals, Manchester City who having reinvented their own historic identity as the 'authentic' Mancunian club (Edensor and Millington, 2008) are fast-becoming a global footballing superpower in their own right.

In terms of the broader urban landscape that surrounds Manchester United's ground, the metropolitan borough of Trafford appears to be one of the more affluent areas of Greater Manchester. Across the region, health outcomes are good, educational attainment is high and crime and anti-social behaviour relatively low (Local Government Association (LGA), 2014). Yet, in the midst of this relative affluence, significant pockets of deprivation persist in those communities surrounding Old Trafford itself. Gorse Hill, where United's stadium is located, along with the neighbouring wards of Stretford and Old Trafford, all appear towards the more impoverished end of the multiple-deprivation scale (Trafford Data Lab, 2018). In all, 60% of households in Gorse Hill suffer from at least one dimension of household deprivation, compared with 52% in Trafford as a borough (Trafford Innovation and Intelligence Lab, 2018b). Furthermore, a little over 56% of households – a figure twice as high as the regional average – are 'financially stretched' or facing 'urban adversity' (Trafford Innovation and Intelligence Lab, 2018a). Incomes in these areas tend to be well below the national average since those in work tend to be employed in lower paid semi-skilled or unskilled jobs (CACI, 2014: 60, 82). Generally, however, levels of employment are low, pushing up the numbers of residents claiming working-age benefits. In the face of these financial pressures, households are struggling to get by. Fewer individuals in these areas are likely to

have the savings that might act as a ‘buffer’ in times of financial difficulty and rising numbers as a result are turning to high interest forms of borrowing in order to make ends meet.

This financial anxiety has been compounded by disparities in the availability of and access to health services, which, like the two Liverpool wards, has led to significantly lower health outcomes. Men living in Gorse Hill can expect to live 11 years less than those living in the more affluent areas of the region (LGA, 2014). Again, although this figure is slightly higher among women, even female life-expectancy levels are almost 6 years lower than wealthier parts of Trafford (LGA, 2014). With a 49.1% real-terms cut in central government funding for local authorities to spend on social care between 2010–2011 and 2017–2018 (National Audit Office (NAO), 2018: 4) – a figure expected to fall even further to 56.3% by 2019–2020 (NAO, 2018: 15) – local attempts to address these poor health outcomes in communities like Gorse Hill will continue to be critically undermined by this reduction in cash from Whitehall.

A little under five miles across the city from Old Trafford sits the Etihad Stadium, the home of Manchester City. The Etihad is located in the ward of Bradford; historically, one of the most deprived areas in the city and in 2015, Manchester’s fifth poorest neighbourhood (Performance, Research and Intelligence, 2015). On a national scale, more than two-thirds of Bradford are among the most deprived parts of England (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2015 cited by Public Intelligence Hub, 2015: 8) with low standards of living and high levels of child poverty. Again, like the two Liverpool wards, 41% of young people in Bradford live in low-income households (DCLG, 2015 cited by Public Intelligence Hub, 2015: 7).

In the face of persistent cuts to the welfare bill since 2010 and the rolling out of the deeply controversial Universal Credit in the Greater Manchester area in November 2017, many of these children and their families have been left without the means to pay for groceries, fuel and other basic necessities (Manchester Evening News, 2017a, 2017b). As these households have struggled to get by, foodbank usage has soared (Loopstra et al., 2015). Of those referred to Britain’s ever-increasing network of foodbanks, nearly 42% did so because they had experienced either delays or changes to their benefits (Trussell Trust, 2018a). According to the Trussell Trust (2018b), foodbanks in full Universal Credit rollout areas have seen referrals increase by an average of 52% in the 12 months that have followed – compared with 13% in those areas where it is yet to be introduced. The North West as a whole has seen the largest uptake of food parcels in the country: over the course of 2017–2018, 197,182 3-day emergency food supplies were distributed across the region compared with 7453 across the same period in 2011–2012 (Trussell Trust, 2018a).

Clearly, none of these developments are likely to have a positive impact upon social indicators, particularly in those areas where health outcomes are already poor. With life-expectancy rates of just 72 years among males (Manchester Population Health Knowledge and Intelligence Team, 2018: 26), Manchester City Council (2016) has already warned that more than two-thirds of Bradford

households require ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of care support now in order to prevent them from becoming dependent upon acute healthcare services in the future. Yet, at a time when social services are facing severe funding pressures (McKee et al., 2012; Taylor-Gooby, 2012) and local authorities expected to ‘do more with less’, many of the most vulnerable in neighbourhoods like Bradford will fall through the cracks created by this financial shortfall.

Although it is men whose long-term health outcomes are most at risk from these cuts, it is typically their partners and/or their daughters upon whom the burden of care will invariably fall (Hall, 2018; MacLeavy, 2011). With the provision of public healthcare stretched, this has created a double and often a triple burden, whereby women are tasked with not simply looking after their own depleted health and wellbeing but also that of their husbands, parents and children as well (Tepe-Belfrage and Steans, 2016). In areas such as Gorse Hill, Bradford, Anfield and County, the narrow economism and gendered politics of austerity has compounded the poverty experienced in some of Britain’s poorest neighbourhoods. This deprivation, however, is not simply a feature of the post-industrial Northern heartlands of the English game. As I shall now demonstrate, it exists across one of the world’s wealthiest cities as well.

London calling: Poverty and precarity in a city of plenty

The geography of English football has, in recent years, increasingly been described along the lines of a ‘North–South divide’. Anthony Clavane (2017), for example, locates the decline of his native Yorkshire’s traditional sporting heritage within the wider context of the neoliberal evisceration experienced by the North as a whole. This shift southwards, Clavane persuasively argues, mirrors the nation’s own skewed distribution of wealth and power. There is clearly much merit in Clavane’s analysis, yet this ‘North–South’ binary tends to over-simplify this complex set of class relations by creating a ‘spatial false consciousness’ (Massey, 2007), one which obscures the acute deprivation that exists within London’s own working-class neighbourhoods.

Facing the self-same cuts to public services and welfare reforms rolled out in other parts of the country, many London households have also been hit hard by the introduction of the nationally fixed benefit cap. Here, for example, the cumulative effect of incorporating the Local Housing Allowance in the £500 per week cap and the decision not to uprate it in line with the capital’s rapidly rising rental market has had a significant impact; the scale of which has not been experienced anywhere else in the country (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017: 20). Consequently, London has seen a sharp jump in landlord possession orders, with 15 evictions per 1000 rented households across the capital compared with 6 for every 1000 throughout the United Kingdom (Trust for London, 2018a) and a doubling of ‘official’ rough sleepers between 2010 and 2017 (Trust for London, 2018b).

No more clearly are London’s own intra-city inequalities evident than in the streets that surround its three most successful and wealthiest football clubs,

Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur in the north and Chelsea to the west of the capital. Chelsea represents something of an anomaly in this analysis of football's deprived communities; its Parsons Green and Walham ward reflects more than any of the neighbourhoods examined here, the *affluence* of its football club. Not only is unemployment lower in Parsons Green and Walham than both the London and national average, one-third of households have a gross annual income of over £75,000 (Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Council (H&FLBC), 2018: 47). Yet, this relative prosperity is significant since it reveals a great deal about the politics of austerity, and who is – or moreover, who is *not* – being affected by these cuts. Here, a large 'in-work' population has resulted in a far lower demand for the types of public services and benefits that have been cut since 2010.

The distribution of this wealth is deeply racialised. More than 82% of residents in Parsons Green and Walham are White – a figure significantly higher than the London average (H&FLBC, 2018: 10). Yet while households in this ward enjoy an average annual income of £63,700, this figure is almost twice that recorded in the College Park and Old Oak ward located to the north of the borough (H&FLBC, 2018: 47), where Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities make up 68.4% of the overall population (H&FLBC, 2018: 10). This contrast reveals not simply the significant pay gap in household incomes across the borough but also the inequalities faced by people of colour. These inequalities were laid bare when, in June 2017, just three miles away from Chelsea's Stamford Bridge ground, a fire destroyed the Grenfell social housing block, claiming the lives of more than 70 residents. Of those who died, the overwhelming majority were people of colour. It is little more than social apartheid when, in an area where predominately White households enjoy incomes that are among the highest in the country – thereby cushioning any effects of austerity that they themselves might be encountering – BAME communities within this self-same area continue to experience low pay, poor quality housing, widespread joblessness and declining welfare support.

These racialised differences are certainly evident in both the Islington council ward of Highbury West, where Arsenal's Emirates ground is located and Northumberland Park in Haringey, home to Tottenham's newly rebuilt White Hart Lane stadium. Across Islington, children growing up in BAME households are more likely to live in poverty compared with their White peers (Islington London Borough Council (ILBC), 2018: 9). Although child poverty is more acute in Liverpool and Manchester, Islington has more young people living in income-deprived households than either of these two cities (DCLG, 2015: 23). Furthermore, Islington has a higher number of older people living in poverty than Liverpool and a similar figure as Manchester (DCLG, 2015). Again, given the need for social services for these 'at risk' groups, any cuts to this type of provision will have a profound effect upon living standards and health outcomes. Across the borough however, poverty abounds, with at least one neighbourhood in every council ward among the poorest 20% of neighbourhoods in the country (ILBC, 2018: 17).

Highbury West experiences some of the highest levels of 'in-work' poverty in the country (ILBC, 2014a: 3). Within this community, there is a significant

over-representation of those living in social housing, overcrowded accommodation and households that fall under at least one of the following categories: Black (particularly Black African) and other ethnic minority households, lone parents and those that have three or more children and/or disabled family members (ILBC, 2014b: 6). With Black households in the United Kingdom more likely to be headed by a lone parent than a couple that 93% of lone parents in Islington are female, and more than half 'economically inactive' (ILBC, 2018: 11), these households are left particularly vulnerable to the wider changes that have been made to income support arrangements since 2010.

Few areas have experienced this interplay between race and poverty more than Northumberland Park, the ward to which Tottenham are due to return at some point during the 2018–2019 season. Situated in the London borough of Haringey, just four miles North West of Arsenal's ground, almost three-quarters of the residents living in the neighbourhood surrounding White Hart Lane are from a BAME background (Haringey London Borough Council (HLBC), 2012: 6–7). Northumberland Park is not simply the most deprived ward in Haringey, it is within the 5% most impoverished areas in England (Haringey London Business Intelligence (HLBI), 2015: 6). Poor health outcomes, higher than average mortality levels (HLBC, 2012: 10–27), high crime rates, low levels of employment and income, combined with difficulties accessing housing and services (HLBI, 2015: 7–10, 13–14) have all compounded this deprivation. Around half of Northumberland Park's residents are either employed in low wage, semi-skilled and unskilled employment and/or receive working-age benefits (HLBC, 2012: 9). With Jobseekers Allowance projected to reach its lowest value since 1991–1992, and a welfare freeze that will mean in a cut in real-terms for working-age families every month until 2020 (Resolution Foundation, 2017: 13–14), communities like Northumberland Park will be among those worst affected by this squeeze on benefit spending.

In an attempt to regenerate this community, £850 million has been ploughed into the area through the Northumberland Development Project; the centrepiece of which is Tottenham's £400 million redevelopment of their White Hart Lane ground. An emulative symbol of the conspicuous consumption that now prevails at the top of the English game, Haringey council and the London Assembly have backed heavily Tottenham's attempt to match the progress made by the club on the pitch with a suitably sized statement of intent off it. After the club had expressed an interest in taking over the Olympic Stadium following the London Games in 2012, the local authorities were concerned that Tottenham might vacate Northumberland Park altogether. The riots in August 2011 only heightened these fears, and the following year, a deal was struck that would see the council cut a number of the requirements that had been included in the club's original planning permission agreement. As well as saving Tottenham almost £16 million, some £41 million worth of public money was found to finance the transport, infrastructure and other community improvements, much of which the club had initially agreed to pay for. Notwithstanding the continuing debates over the benefits to the local community of stadium-led regeneration (Davies, 2010; Thornley, 2002) – seen

here, not simply in the case of Tottenham (Panton and Walters, 2018), but in neighbouring Islington and across the cities of Liverpool and Manchester – this type of consumption demonstrates again the limits of austerity, and the stark contrast between the entrenched poverty experienced across each of these neighbourhoods and the wealth of their respective football clubs.

Conclusion

Despite the concerted assault upon public spending that has taken place since 2010, the leisure class of English football discussed here has, in this self-same era of austerity, embarked upon a remarkable period of conspicuous consumption. This is critical since it provides both an insight into the unequal social conditions underpinning English football, and the reductive economism of austerity itself. The growing disparities between this leisure class and its local communities has demonstrated that the country is clearly not ‘all in this together’, as the chief architects of austerity have frequently claimed. Indeed, within the heartlands of English football, the effects of this austerity have not simply deepened the levels of poverty experienced in these communities; crucially, they have done so along the already-fractured lines of gender, ethnicity and class.

Of course, the clubs discussed here retain a profound cultural importance in the landscapes of their local communities. Yet, where these clubs were once emblematic of these working-class neighbourhoods, they are today aggregated to represent the wider interests of a transnational capitalist class. The formation of this class has been undoubtedly significant in the transformation of the English game. Such an expansion, however, reproduced through the ‘Veblen behaviours’ of emulation and conspicuous consumption discussed here has also given rise to a widening fault-line between these clubs and the impoverished communities that today sit in the ever-lengthening shadows of their imposing stadiums. This juxtaposition between feast and famine, of unbridled wealth in the midst of poverty, and, ultimately, conspicuous consumption in an era of austerity reflects the changing class relations of England’s football nation. This skewed distribution of wealth has not only laid bare the economic inequalities and social vulnerabilities that now exist in the post-industrial heartlands of the English game, it has revealed the limits of austerity itself. At precisely the same point that these cuts and welfare reforms have deepened the poverty experienced in their own neighbourhoods, this leisure class has shown itself to be impervious to this austerity, establishing instead an unparalleled global regime of wealth accumulation. The emulation and conspicuous consumption financed by these arrangements is now a world away from the entanglements of precarity and poverty faced by these crisis-stricken communities.

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1. All transfer fees have been calculated using figures obtained from Transfermarkt (2018). The figures cited here were correct as of 1 February 2018 when the 2017–2018 winter transfer window closed across Europe.

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